

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0478
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH
AMCONSUL LIVERPOOL

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E. O. 11652: N/ A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: COMMONS DEFEATS MEASURE TO RESTORE CAPITAL
PUNISHMENT

1. BEGIN SUMMARY - BY A VOTE OF 320 TO 178 THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON APRIL 11 DECISIVELY REJECTED A MEASURE TO RESTORE CAPITAL PUNISHMENT FOR CERTAIN CATEGORIES OF MURDER. THE ISSUE IS ONE WHICH HAS GENERATED CONSIDERABLE HEAT IN BRITISH POLITICS OVER THE YEARS AND IT WAS NOT LAID TO REST WHEN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT WAS ABOLISHED IN 1969. A MEASURE OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE REINTRODUCTION OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT UNDOUBTEDLY TO BE REFLECTED IN PRESSURE ON THE GOVT BY TORY BACKBENCHERS, MOST BUT NOT ALL OF WHOM ARE IDENTIFIED AS BEING RIGHT- WING OR RIGHT OF CENTER IN THEIR POLITICS. THE VOTE IN COMMONS WAS NOT ON PARTY LINES. HAD THE MEASURE NOT BEEN REJECTED, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN DAMAGING TO THE TORIES POLITICALLY. END SUMMARY

1. THE VOTE APRIL 11 CAME ON A PRIVATE MEMBER'S BILL SPONSORED BY TED TAYLOR (GLASGOW) WHICH HAD RECEIVED ADVANCE SUPPORT OF ABOUT 100 TORY BACKBENCHERS. ITS
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DEFEAT BY A MAJORITY OF 142 VOTES APPROXIMATES THAT SUFFERED BY OPPONENTS OF THE ABOLITION BILL IN 1969. UNDER THE 10- MINUTE RULE, TAYLOR SPOKE IN FAVOR OF HIS MEASURE AND ROY JENKINS, WHO HAD MANAGED THE LABOR GOVT' S ABOLITION BILL IN 1969, SPOKE AGAINST IT. THE VOTE WAS A FREE VOTE AND DREW AN EXCEPTIONALLY LARGE NUMBER OF MP' S IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

2. THOUGH PRIME MINISTER HEATH AND HOME SECRETARY CARR HAD MADE CLEAR THEIR OPPOSITION TO THE MEASURE, WE UNDERSTAND NO SPECIAL PRESSURES WERE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON GOVT MINISTERS TO VOTE AGAINST IT. ONLY THREE LABOR MP' S VOTED FOR THE MEASURE, WHILE ABOUT 80 TORY MP' S VOTED AGAINST IT, INCLUDING THE PRIME MINISTER, CARR, AND CABINET MEMBERS SIR KEITH JOSEPH, JAMES PRIOR, MAURICE MACMILLAN, GEOFFREY RIPPON AND GEOFFREY HOWE. THE ONLY CABINET MEMBERS TO VOTE FOR THE BILL WERE ANTHONY BARBER AND MARGARET THATCHER. SEVERAL OTHERS, INCLUDING FOREIGN SECRETARY SIR ALEC DOUGLAS- HOME, ABSTAINED FOR VARIOUS REASONS. INTERESTINGLY, ENOUGH POWELL VOTED AGAINST THE MEASURE AND OPPOSED IT PUBLICLY IN A WELL- ARGUED ARTICLE IN THE APRIL 11 DAILY TELEGRAPH.

3. COMMENT: ALTHOUGH THE MEASURE TO REINTRODUCE CAPITAL PUNISHMENT GENERATED CONSIDERABLE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL INTEREST, IT WAS NOT REALLY VERY SIGNIFICANT IN BRITISH DOMESTIC POLITICAL TERMS. THE SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF TORY VOTES WILL PROBABLY ENSURE THAT THE ISSUE COMES UP AT THE PARTY CONFERENCE IN OCTOBER, BUT THE LEADERSHIP SHOULD NOT HAVE DIFFICULTY IN SQUELCHING IT. HAD THE MEASURE RECEIVED A FAVORABLE VOTE, MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE, AND WE AGREE, THAT IT COULD HAVE DAMAGED POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR THE TORIES IN THE CENTER OF THE ELECTORATE, A CONSTITUENCY VITAL TO THE PARTY' S PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY.

SOHM

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